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UK announces equine degree program

UNIVERSITY ALSO PLANS UPGRADES AT ITS FARM ON NEWTOWN PIKE

By Sarah Vos
HERALD-LEADER STAFF WRITER

Starting this fall, University of Kentucky students can major in equine science and management. It's a degree program that had been noticeably absent at the flagship university in what calls itself the Horse Capital of the World.

UK President Lee T. Todd Jr. said that the major and other changes announced yesterday would transform equine education in Kentucky and help the horse industry.

"This is a classic example of how our flagship university can ... add value to Kentucky's leading industry," Todd said, as a horse neighed in the background.

Yesterday's announcement was made at Maine Chance Farm on Newtown Pike. UK plans major improvements at the farm.

The university plans to build a teaching pavilion and renovate a foaling barn. A center to study strangles -- a bacterial infection in horses -- and a 24-stall animal containment building also are planned. Other improvements include making the farm's border along Newtown Pike more scenic and implementing better environmental practices.

So far the university has \$3 million for the project, said Scott Smith, dean of the College of Agriculture. It needs to raise an additional \$10 million to complete the improvements.

UK also announced a new endowed professorship funded by a \$500,000 gift from the James Graham Brown Foundation, matched by the state's Bucks for Brains program. The professorship is in honor of Stanley Smith Dickson, a 1953 UK alumnus who owns Glen Oak Farm in Bourbon County.

UK previously offered horse-related courses but no degree. The University of Louisville

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offers a bachelor's degree in equine studies, which emphasizes riding.

UK's program will be unique because of its focus on science, said Bob Coleman, a horse specialist in UK's Cooperative Extension Service who will lead the new program.

UK's undergraduate degree program will have two tracks: a management option focusing on horse and farm, and a business option focusing on business and organizational management in the horse industry. Internships will be required.

"What we can offer is experience with the horses, the farm, the science of animal productivity and growth, animal health issues and a broad exposure to agribusiness and agricultural enterprise," Smith said.

The program will help UK with its goal of becoming the world's leading institution in equine education and research, Smith said. In the future, the school might build a riding facility and put together an equestrian team.

Smith did not know why it had taken UK so long to develop an equine degree program. Part of it has to do with changes in the industry and at the university, he said.

"The equine enterprises would now regard themselves as more a part of agriculture and farming," Smith said. "At the same time, we at the university have come to recognize that the No. 1 agricultural commodity in this state, even though we don't measure it fully, is equine."

The new program will help Kentucky's equine industry, said David Switzer, executive director of the Kentucky Thoroughbred Association, Kentucky Thoroughbred Breeders and Owners.

"We're trying to develop new leaders in our industry, farm managers," Switzer said. "They'll be recruiting kids from all over the United States. ... These kids will stay in the community and find jobs."

Smith predicted the new major would be popular among students. About half of animal-science students would rather major in equine management, he said.

One student who promised to sign up for the program was Gus Koch, a sophomore at UK. He grew up on a horse farm, doing chores and going to sales at Keeneland.

"In the horse industry, there's never been a substitute for experience," Koch said. But the program would help him learn the science and technology needed to be successful on today's farms.

Staff writer Art Jester contributed to this story. Reach Sarah Vos at (859) 231-3309, 1-800-950-6397, Ext. 3309, or svos@herald-leader.com.

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